


Hospitality in Jeopardy: Organizing Diverse Low-Wage Service Workers

SAGE Open
 July-September 2016: 1–11
 © The Author(s) 2016
 DOI: 10.1177/2158244016661749
 sgo.sagepub.com


Marquita Walker¹

Abstract

This article explores United Needle Trades and Industrial Employees (UNITE) and Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (HERE)'s strategic campaign to organize a diverse low-wage workforce of housekeepers in the hospitality industry in one Midwest city in Indiana. Organizers' personal narratives provide examples of the challenges involved when creating relationships between low-wage workers from different racial and cultural backgrounds as part of a strategy to rebuff management's continual efforts to exploit and undervalue its workforce, increase profits for the firm, and discredit the union as an effective intermediary for representation. The findings suggest UNITE-HERE's organizing attempts realized gains for housekeepers in the form of wage and benefit increases and dismantled a covert blacklisting policy even though the hotel remains non-unionized.

Keywords

organizing, hospitality industry, Labor Process Theory, UNITE-HERE, low-wage workers

Introduction

Unionization efforts among low-wage housekeepers at a large downtown Midwest hotel in Indiana began in 2006 through the *Hotel Workers Rising* campaign of the United Needle Trades and Industrial Employees (UNITE) and the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (HERE) or UNITE-HERE¹ based in Washington, D.C. UNITE-HERE's organizing strategy focuses on "less mobile service sector industries . . . where the ability of employers to move work out of the country is much more restricted" (Bronfenbrenner & Hickey, 2004, p. 32) and is one of the comprehensive campaigns in which a number of organizing strategies are used to successfully organize workers. Bronfenbrenner & Hickey (2004) suggests the use of five or more organizing strategies in a comprehensive campaign results in better union win rates and that UNITE-HERE generally used four or more tactics in their campaigns.² UNITE-HERE primarily engages in organizing the unorganized and runs an aggressive organizing drive in major financial cities against hotels that hire large numbers of immigrant workers in service positions (UNITE-HERE, 2012b).

The shift in organizing away from industries which are easily mobile, digital, and can transfer work abroad within a global economy to less mobile industries whose workers are tied to a local geography means organizing more service workers in health care, hospitality, and home care industries. The caring nature of service work and the gendered division of labor in these industries relegates mostly women to these

low-paying positions in which their work is undervalued. Organizing efforts within service industries are generally focused outside of the more traditional National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) for several reasons. Stringent requirements for elections and bargaining to a first contract have moved the locus of organizing to more successful non-board campaigns. Service sector unionization successes mean the majority of new union members are women (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). UNITE-HERE has some organizing successes in the service industry such as the non-renewed collective agreement for 4,200 workers between UNITE-HERE and the Multi-Employer Group (MEG) in San Francisco and UNITE-HERE Local 1 and Starwood in Chicago (Zuberi, 2007). There have also been organizing failures as evidenced by disparities in hotel unionization in large metropolitan cities. According to Zuberi (2007), the only large cities considered to have "somewhat high union density" (p. 66) in the United States are Las Vegas and Washington, D.C. There exists much to be done in "global cities" across the United States.

¹Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis, USA

Corresponding Author:

Marquita Walker, Associate Professor, Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis, 350 University Blvd., AD 2020R, Indianapolis, IN 46202, USA.
 Email: marqwalk@iupui.edu



UNITE-HERE has had success in organizing less mobile populations in the hospitality industry by using internal and external tactics as part of a larger comprehensive organizing strategy (Bronfenbrenner, 2006; Bronfenbrenner & Hickey, 2004). Internal tactics include a concentration on building one-on-one relationships among workers inside and outside of the workplace, strategic targeting, active representative rank and file committees, effectively utilized member volunteer organizers, and escalating pressure tactics in the workplace (Bronfenbrenner, 2006). These time-consuming internal tactics are essential building blocks promoting an understanding among workers, regardless of their race, gender, ethnicity, or work status, of the commonalities they share in their fight for recognition in the workplace and their ability to join together in solidarity and confront management's powerful overreach. UNITE-HERE relentlessly works outside of the work environment to build relationships among low-wage workers who then become organizing committees within the workplace to recruit others facing the same challenging work-related grievances.

External organizing tactics are providing adequate and appropriate staffing and financial support, creating benchmarks and assessments, raising issues that resonate in the workplace and the community, escalating pressure tactics inside and outside the workplace, and proactively building toward a first contact (Bronfenbrenner, 2006). UNITE-HERE engages in these tactics by raising awareness of the housekeepers' situation through public relations campaigns, encouraging community participation in the form of peaceful demonstrations and rallies, sending delegations of community members to management to present worker concerns, and increasing public pressure to encourage local legislative changes, which ensure equitable treatment for workers.

Background

Although organizing efforts within the housekeeping population took place in many Midwest hotels, one major organizing effort was levied in the Hyatt hotel as a result of the Hyatt's egregious use of subcontracting housekeeper positions to temporary agencies, thus relieving the Hyatt of paying better wages and providing benefits to housekeepers (Soltani & Wilkinson, 2010; Tufts, 2006; UNITE-HERE, 2012a); the high injury rate suffered by housekeepers in the service industry (Buchanan et al., 2010); the Hyatt's abuse and discrimination of housekeepers (S. E. Smith, 2012); and the Hyatt's policies of refusing to remain neutral during organizing drives (UNITE-HERE, 2012a). Because the number of private sector unionized workers in the United States has been dwindling for decades due to weakened labor laws and corporatized efforts to prevent or slow down organizing efforts, UNITE-HERE uses a number of different strategies "which are *integrated*, reinforcing one another as a systemic approach to renewing the union's strength. The use of multiple and integrated strategies is necessary, given the context

of a global hospitality sector that employs large numbers of marginalized workers" (Tufts, 2006, p. 201).

The push back from the Hyatt is extraordinary though not unexpected. Bronfenbrenner & Hickey (2004) writes, "the overwhelming majority of employers . . . aggressively oppose the union's organizing efforts through a combination of threats, discharges, promises of improvements, unscheduled unilateral changes in wages and benefits, bribes, and surveillance" (p. 38). The capitalist nature of our economy emphasizes that firms must be most concerned with making a profit. As the hotel industry functions within this capitalistic system, controlling input costs are a way to realize greater profits. One way for the hotel industry to cap labor input costs is to develop economics of scale (Seifert & Messing, 2006).

According to Greenhouse (2006), there currently are about three million private sector service workers and about seven million in public sector unions. This burgeoning service sector has contributed to the new two-tiered economy consisting of service employees and high-technology workers, thus increasing inequality in wealth and income in the United States. The service sector as a growing sector in the new economy has contributed to low-wage jobs, thus escalating poverty issues and creating a class of citizens known as the working poor (Greenhouse, 2006). Sassen (2006) comments "we might be seeing a type of poverty and inequality that constitutes new social forms" (p. 13).³ Many of the working poor receive social transfer payments as a subsidy for survival. Measures to engage in relief for the working poor, such as an increase in the minimum wage or the earned income tax credit, have done little to lift large numbers of workers out of poverty.

The U.S. Travel Association suggests tourism as an American industry generates US\$2.1 trillion in economic output, supports 14.9 million jobs, employs one of every nine non-farm jobs in the United States (Landmark Study Reveals RIO of Business Travel, 2009; U.S. Travel Association, 2013), and reports that international tourism generates around US\$4,500 per person in spending whereas the domestic tourism industry generates around US\$900 per person in spending. According to the report, *The Economic Impact of Travel and Tourism on Indiana* (The Power of Travel: Economic Impact of Travel and Tourism, 2009), travelers to Indiana spent around US\$8.8 million in 2007, and tax revenues generated during that period totaled more than US\$1.2 million. This created around 98,000 jobs with a total payroll of more than US\$1.9 million. Legislative District 4, which includes Indianapolis, employed 12.1 thousand workers with a total payroll of US\$278.9 million and total tourism spending of US\$1,073.2 million (The Power of Travel: Economic Impact of Travel and Tourism, 2009).

The tourist industry relies heavily on unskilled and semi-skilled jobs, so it draws heavily from the secondary labor market (Adler, 2004; Barker & Christensen, 1998). The secondary labor market tend[s] to be low paying, with poorer working conditions and little chance of advancement, . . .

conducive to harsh and capricious work discipline and characterized by considerable instability in jobs and a high turnover among the labor force (Piore, 1972). Ninety percent of all new jobs created by 2000 were service sector jobs (Adler, 2004). There are more than 1.3 million workers in the U.S. hotel industry and “approximately one quarter of them are housekeepers” (Sawchuk, 2009). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015a, 2015b), housekeepers’ and maids’ jobs in the Indiana leisure and hospitality industry totaled 17,900 in 2015 with an annual mean wage of US\$20,180. In the Indianapolis–Carmel Metropolitan Statistical area in 2013, there were 5,420 housekeeping jobs, which paid an hourly mean wage of US\$9.14 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015b) one of the lowest in the nation.

Large cities have “emerged as strategic [regional] territories,” which become “concrete operations of the global economy” (Sassen, 2006, p. 196). These concrete operations include high paying and highly skilled jobs in banking and financial services, corporate service industries, telecommunications and information flow, and low-wage, manual jobs, which support the corporate infrastructure. This polarized dichotomy of wages contributes to the overall disparity in “income distribution and occupational distribution of workers” (Sassen, 2006, p. 197). These large cities host “the rapid growth of the financial industry and of highly specialized services [which] generate not only high-level technical and administrative jobs but also low-wage unskilled jobs” (Sassen, 2006, p. 9). These low-wage day-to-day jobs, usually held by women and immigrants, are invisible to most consumers but very much a part of the global economy (Sassen, 2006).

Large chain hotels, which work to attract tourists and venture capitalists, provide the support necessary to make city visitors welcome. This requires thousands of service workers to provide a home away from home for consumers, tourists, and business people, with signature service, which includes luxury accommodations including extra comfort incentives such as “heavenly beds” (Zuberi, 2007, p. 60), requiring housekeepers to engage in lifting heavier mattresses, changing extra sheets, handling more pillows, gathering more laundry, arranging heavy duvets, and providing extra amenities. When room facilities are “super-sized” by adding bigger mirrors, more floor space, and kitchenettes, more effort and energy are necessary to prepare the rooms for guests. Housekeepers must complete room preparation within some fixed time frame and are required to clean 20 to 30 rooms per 8-hr shift (Onsoyen, Mykletun, & Steiro, 2009). If the room is especially dirty and requires extra attention, the housekeeper is allotted no more time; she must complete the clean-up within the specified time frame. Onsoyen et al. (2009) writes that “house-keeping work is rather repetitive and limited in variety and scope, and with little guest contact” (p. 85). This has produced exhaustion and injuries within this workforce. Sawchuk (2009) reports, “statistically house-keeping work is now North America’s most dangerous retail occupation” (p. 172).

The Invisibility of Housekeepers

Difficulty in organizing housekeepers is aggravated because of their invisibility from the public and their diverse makeup. They are primarily women of color who are disadvantaged within the hotel industry via processes and structures dependent on cheap, gendered, segregated, and racialized labor (Buchanan et al., 2010; Scherzer, Rugulies, & Krause, 2005; Tufts, 2006). Although housekeepers play a vital role in maintaining clean and secure guest rooms, they are “hidden from view” (Adib & Guerrier, 2003, p. 424) because they remain in the background and have little interaction with hotel guests. Much of the hospitality literature suggests “that ethnic minority women are less likely to be employed front-of-house or in customer contact jobs in the service industry” and “are more prominent in jobs in which they are required to be nearly invisible to the customer” (Adib & Guerrier, 2003, p. 425). Organizing the lowest paid service workers in the hotel industry (Tufts, 2006), who have few, if any, affordable benefits and suffer one of the highest injury rates of all service workers (Buchanan et al., 2010; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011), is exacerbated because the cultural and racial walls of the labor movement itself historically favor organizing White, skilled workers (Sawchuk, 2009). The ability of the hospitality industry to utilize low-wage labor allows expansion without assuming the associated costs and obligations (Adler & Adler, 2004). This undervaluing and underrepresentation contributes to keeping housekeepers in low wage, high turnover jobs with diminished career ladders for advancement (Adler, 2004; Barker & Christensen, 1998).

Because housekeepers in the hospitality industry are essential components in the tourism industry, which is an important factor of our capitalistic society, it makes sense to explore the power relationships these workers have within the hospitality industry and their efficacy in affecting changes in those relationships. This article situates challenges organizers face when organizing a diverse workforce within Labor Process Theory (LPT), which explains management’s strategies for reducing workers’ bargaining power through the deskilling and devaluing of workers to gain profits for the firm. LPT demands excess work beyond necessary value to increase profits for the corporation. Exploring the strategies organizers use in countering management’s exploitation of low-wage workers exposes the difficulties in organizing a diverse low-wage workforce within an economic power relationship, which strives to keep workers disadvantaged to maintain profit margins.

LPT

LPT seeks to understand the control and resistance dichotomy between a capitalist-free market system and how workers react to, engage with, and are exploited by that system. LPT explores the systemic deskilling of the workforce for the ultimate purpose of increasing production and profit for owners

of production and “examines the labor-capital conflict over control of the labor process” (C. Smith, 2012, p. 33). Adler (2007) suggests firms seek to control the complex and autonomous nature of skill to “ensure lower costs and greater control” (p. 1344). An extension of Marxist theory about the organization of work, LPT explores the control of work, how work is paid for, what skills are needed for work, and how work is facilitated (Braverman, 1974; Buroway, 1985). Marx, in his famous work, *Capital*, describes a work process aligned with craft production in which a few workers make an entire product. This work organization structure remains static until external circumstances call for more product in a shorter time frame, which triggers the need for a more efficient organization of work. Organizational work structures are altered to reflect a division of labor in which specific workers repeatedly hone specific skills to capitalize on efficiencies in movement and time (Marx & Engels, 1967). Once the specificity of each worker’s job is reduced to a repetitive motion in the production process, early industrial capitalists as well as current owners of production treat labor as another input in a production system that they control. The control owners of production have over the production process determines the power relationship between owners and labor. Workers, stripped of their ability to control their own work processes, are weakened in the labor–management dyad and utilize alternative means of regaining power such as organizing collectives in the form of labor unions.

Braverman (1974) posits that under the competitive economic system of capitalism, the owners of production utilize an hierarchical structure of work organization that contributes to profit efficiency and introduces a power relationship between management and labor, which waters down workers’ skills, thus reducing workers’ pride, sense of worth, and control over their work and then uses this deskilling as the reason for cutting workers’ wages and increasing workers’ hours.⁴ Although non-Marxists posit technological change as the driver of social change and work organizations, LPT suggests new technologies are driven by the socially constructed nature of the relations of production (Adler, 2007) or the concept of the social relationship workers have with the owners of production, the means of production, and the organization of work. The complexity and autonomy of workers’ skills are then affected by the workers’ relationship to those who control production processes in an increasingly urgent quest to lower costs and appease stockholders in a market-based economy.

Williamson (1980) suggests the structural component of work organization is not necessarily to blame for inefficiencies in the production process but rather that “the organization of work is predominantly, a transaction cost issue” (Williamson, 1980, p. 35). He contends there is not an absolute connection between hierarchical work structures or their absence and optimal performance within firms. The optimal work organizational structure is one which “promotes efficiency and commands general respect [for workers]” (p. 36).

This suggests the structure of work organization within a firm has an effect on the power relationships within the firm.

According to LPT, extra energy is extracted from low-wage workers who become little more than interchangeable parts in a production system. Deskilling creates disengaged workers who have no emotional or intellectual attachment to their work, are easily controlled, and have no idea of the true value added they bring to the production process. Under LPT, workers’ bargaining power is diluted by managements’ strategies of exploitation and used to reduce the power of workers who have skills not reproducible by technology.

An expansion of LPT proposes workers are coerced within their work environments to produce surplus labor beyond that of necessary value by working longer hours or working faster (Buroway, 1985). Workers, whose interests are in direct conflict with capitalist interests, are then working for their own exploitation. The surplus labor provides the profit margin for capitalists. For management, this is a win–lose situation in which gains for management are losses for labor. When a firm’s labor costs increase, their profit margin is reduced. This economic relationship between capital and labor is at the heart of the labor–management relationship and revolves around which side holds the economic power.

Workers in restrictive work environments, which are divided and separated into specific units or motions to produce efficiency and are controlled by capitalists, are acting under the illusion of choice. These divisions silo workers into departments and subunits distinct and distanced from capitalists. Capitalists become invisible to workers who can see no farther than their own workspace thus obscuring workers’ visions of the totality of the “labour process to the relations of production” (Buroway, 1985, p. 33). Workers then work simultaneously under the constraints of necessary and surplus labor, which are obscured because they have no way of knowing when necessary labor ends and surplus labor begins.

Workers measure the value of their wage based on the goods and services they can purchase (Buroway, 1985). There is no distinction for the worker between his or her expenditure of labor for sustenance living (necessary value) or surplus value (capitalist’s profits). Because wages are paid by the hour or by salary, the worker is further divested of input into this wage–labor contract, which both obscures and secures surplus labor.

The capitalist system does not provide a living wage from employers to low-wage workers in the service sector because the efficient nature of capitalism is to produce increasing profit margins while cutting cost inputs such as labor (Buchanan et al., 2010). Wages of unskilled or semiskilled workers are targets of efficiency because these non-unionized workers have little or no power to set their own wages. The earning power of low-wage workers does not allow them to purchase the goods and services needed for sustenance living in a competitive marketplace whereas owners of production can purchase goods and services they need and want in the marketplace. Therefore, the capitalist system

then works for the owners of production but does not work for low-wage workers who must rely on “a ‘social wage’ from the state in the form of publicly funded medical care, transportation, housing, education, culture, and recreation” (Mann, 2001, p. 260). This transfer of labor cost from the owners of production to the public allows the hospitality industry to expand without incurring the associated costs (Adler, 2004).

Buroway (1985) suggests that workers learn to adjust to the “degradation of work” (p. 36) because of the inevitability of these structures under a capitalistic system. In other words, workers learn to adapt or adjust to their restrictive work environments as a coping mechanism, which allows them “feelings of temporary relief from the discomfort of certain work realities, feelings which arise when these factors have become part of the worker’s customary interpretation of his situation” (p. 37).⁵ He calls these adjustments “games” (Buroway, 1985, p. 38) and explains that games, with their rules and outcomes, allow workers within a confined and restricted workspace to feel some control over their efforts. The act of playing the game means the worker consents to the game’s rules and potential outcomes, so when the worker engages in playing the work game, the worker actually is buying into or consenting to the conditions of the relations of production under a capitalist system.

It is important to note the differentiation between management and the owners of production. The terms, often used interchangeably, reflect different levels of control. The owners of production own and control capital. Their interaction with workers who produce the goods and services is limited if not nonexistent. The owners of production hire managers who do interact with workers on the shop floor or in service industries. These middle managers, also employees of the owners of production, have a unique role in that they maintain a supervisory role in the production structure but are subject to the will of the owners of production. Middle management then is concerned with controlling workers to increase output; they do this by securing cooperation from workers or by coercing workers into performing. This means that middle management and workers share an interest in preserving work games because through the games, management has a measure of control over workers, and workers are interested in preserving work games because through the games, they achieve some measure of satisfaction from their work.

Management’s stake in controlling the rules of the game revolve around output, so when productivity is affected because of workers’ failure to adapt to their working environments and continued reestablishment of the structures of exploitation, management steps in to change the rules of game by changing job descriptions, moving personnel, reducing the workforce, and so forth. Management’s goal is to retain profits at all costs. Workers push back against management’s rule changes through resistance in the form of natural soldering, militancy, or unionization.

It is these conditions that spur UNITE-HERE to seek “greater equality and opportunity” for their membership which is “predominantly women and people of color” (UNITE-HERE Industries, 2015) who are exploited, endangered, and abused. UNITE-HERE organizers engage in a multi-component strategy in efforts to establish a union to protect diverse low-wage workers from management’s search for increasing profits.

Challenges in Organizing Diverse Workforces

Tufts (2006) maintains that organizing hotel workers is a great challenge because of the diversity within the “‘global’ hotel workforce” (p. 202). Large global financial cities attract vulnerable populations who hope to find work there, so large hospitality chains have a large pool of “immigrants, women, and people of colour with limited employment opportunities” from which to choose. These populations are often doubly disadvantaged not only because of their limited proficiency in the English language, poverty status, and lack of educational skills but also because of “built-in bias in the receiving society against foreigners, especially when they belong to a different culture, religious or ethnic group” (Ghosh, 2003, p. 7).

One problem in organizing diverse workforces is the inability to separate the various identities of workers associated with ethnicity, nationality, class, immigration, gender, age, race, and sexual orientation as a sole barrier to organizing.⁶ Brah (1996) would term this “intersectionality” (p. 242), whereas Butler (1990) would call this “fusion” (p. 3). Rather, challenges to organizing are an amalgam or, at the very least, a comingling of the ethnic, national, racial,⁷ cultural, sexual, and gendered identities making it difficult to isolate one aspect of diversity as a sole contributor to organizational barriers. Although it is not the intent of this study to analyze the components of diversity in conjunction with each other as they contribute to organizational barriers, I think it is important to realize that no component of diversity works in isolation. Subsequently there are language, cultural, and historical barriers to consider when organizing.

Method

After securing institutional review board (IRB) approval for the study, I requested interviews from three UNITE-HERE organizers who worked with the *Hotel Workers’ Rising* campaign. I met these organizers on various occasions through UNITE-HERE events I attended. Two organizers agreed to be interviewed, whereas one organizer declined citing her tangential experience with the process. One interview was conducted in person at a downtown coffee shop and lasted about 2 hr, whereas the other interview was conducted by phone because the organizer had moved to another locality and lasted about 1 hr. I asked each organizer four pre-determined open-ended interview questions, which involved

demographics, their organizing experiences, the organizing processes used, and the difficulties of organizing diverse workforces. Notes from both interviews were keyboarded. It was my hope the interview discussion would continue in an organic fashion and other questions, concerns, or comments will evolve from the initial questions.

1. Demographic information: name, age, race, gender, and length of service with UNITE-HERE.

Commentary: Although I could visually determine characteristics such as race and gender, I wanted to be sure I included the organizer's perceptions of his or her own identity.

2. Tell me how you came to be an organizer for UNITE-HERE.

Commentary: I wanted to know what initially interested the organizer in this type of work. Organizing in the field is not a particularly high paying job with good benefits and usually requires lots of time and energy. Sometimes, the payoffs are far and few between. My assumption was that organizers had some sort of previous connection to a unionized household or had worked in a low-paying service sector job and saw unionizing as a path to job security and better wages and benefits.

3. What do you see as the greatest barrier to organizing these housekeepers?

Commentary: My assumption was the greatest barrier to organizing is management's all-out assault against efforts to unionize the workforce. Although management's resistance to organizing was a huge challenge to organizing, the organizers spoke of building one-on-one relationships between and among diverse constituents as equally challenging.

4. Organizing diverse workforces is challenging in many ways. How do you respond to the challenges associated with ethnicity, nationality, class, immigration, gender, age, race, and sexual orientation when organizing the housekeepers?

Commentary: This was the question that opened a floodgate of responses from the organizers and from which I learned about the necessity of covert and underground relationship building, which foregrounds any delegations to management to present grievances, signed authorization cards, and seek their consideration and acceptance of a unionized workforce. This period of time, which can last for months or years, prior to confronting management is an absolute necessity in building the solidarity among workers needed to withstand the not unexpected backlash from management and is the bedrock of organizing tactics used by UNITE-HERE. The ability of organizers to create the bonds of solidarity outside the workplace and maintain these solidary bonds within the workplace speaks to the organizer's ability to portray the commonalities of low-wage workers from diverse backgrounds, who are often suspect of one

another because of stereotypes associated with race and gender and the tenacity necessary to continually confront the individual or group prejudice associated with the stereotypes.

Limitations of This Study

Because only two organizers' responses were captured, their narratives are not meant to be representative of all UNITE-HERE organizers' tactics and strategies (though UNITE-HERE organizers are similarly trained) in organizing a diverse workforce and are colored by the backgrounds, education, and experiences of the specific organizer. Their responses do suggest the overall complexity involved with organizing diverse low-wage workers and provide an example of organizing, which could be generalized to other equity-seeking groups.

Findings

The following two narratives from UNITE-HERE organizers provide details about the challenges they face when organizing low-wage workers in the hospitality industry. The magnitude of building relationships of trust among employees is a time-consuming, labor-intensive activity, which, to be effective, must be conducted in a manner that does not raise management's suspicion that organizing efforts are afoot. The advantage to this approach allows employees interested in forming a union to bond together in solidarity before management begins an all-out assault on their organizing activities. Because management has access to their employees during working hours, they always have the advantage of disseminating anti-union information through internal avenues of information such as bulletin boards and internal memos, captive audience meetings, and one-on-one meetings. Without the union's pre-relationship building efforts that provide workers the tools to counter management's aggressive anti-union campaign, workers would stand little chance against the corporation's strong offense.

The analysis of organizers' narratives suggests unionizing to secure increased wages, benefits, dignity, and a voice in the workplace as a way of resisting management's effort to extract more work and longer hours from the housekeeper's daily jobs in return for the same compensation. Management's demands to clean more rooms in less time forced the housekeepers to work "off the clock," exert more effort in scrubbing floors, stripping beds, and vacuuming and dusting without any new technologies or protective equipment from harmful chemicals, pit housekeeper against housekeeper by publicly posting details of worker productivity on a bulletin board outside the office door, and publicly humiliating and degrading housekeepers by threatening and intimidating them in view of other workers. With no individual recourse other than to exit employment, the housekeepers covertly worked with UNITE-HERE organizers to build relationships in preparation for organizing. Painstakingly and

methodically, organizers persevere in the hopes of creating workplace protections from overwork, wage theft, abuse, human devaluation, and dangerous working conditions.

Organizers' Narratives

Organizer 1 has been with UNITE-HERE for more than 10 years. A White male in his late 20s, whose grandfather was blacklisted during the McCarthy era for communist activity, said he initially wanted to become an attorney. Growing up in a predominately Black and Latino neighborhood, he changed his mind about becoming a lawyer after working in a hotel on the east coast in which he became very involved with the successful organization of the primarily Salvadorian service workers by UNITE-HERE. Fluent in Spanish, he liked the organizing model used by UNITE-HERE as well as the long-term tenure of its organizers, so he responded to a call for an organizer in a Midwest city. The pay back he receives from his organizing position is self-satisfaction and enjoyment from watching people develop, empowering others, inspiring others to take leadership roles, and instilling in others the hope they can become self-sufficient.

Organizer 1 uses the internal organizing tactic of building one-on-one relationships among workers inside and outside the workplace as a pivotal element in moving forward the organizing process. One major challenge Organizer 1 faced was trust issues between Blacks and Latinos who believe each other is suspect. He relates that Blacks often assume Latinos are undocumented, so Latinos, discriminated against at work and in their communities, are treated worse than Blacks and are often willing to "take on the boss." Organizer 1 shares a story about Hosea (not his real name) and Linda (not her real name). Linda did not trust Hosea because he was Latino, and Hosea did not trust Linda because she was Black. Hosea worked in the hotel laundry and had been a union leader in Mexico who led a hunger strike, so he was very pro-union. Linda worked in house-keeping for 18 years and was diagnosed with cancer but did not have company-provided health insurance, so she was pro-union and willing to hold meetings in her home twice weekly. She helped Organizer 1 develop a list of potential "committee people" sympathetic to union organizing. Organizer 1 had worked separately with Hosea and Linda but never divulged their names to each other because part of the success of underground organizing is to keep the names of pro-union workers secret. After 10 months of separate communication, the organizer had a meeting with Linda and Hosea to talk about their differences and to bridge the racial barriers separating them. This meeting led to Linda and Hosea agreeing they had an economic commonality in working together; they became part of a workers' committee seeking to reach out to their coworkers and share the importance of organizing. This second internal tactic of recruiting workers to be active representative rank and file committee members ensures continual committee growth through a

snowball effect. Each committee member recruits another coworker and so forth.

African Americans and Latinos see the world of work through different lens according to Gordon and Lenhardt (2007). They use different measures to express the "monetary and social or citizenship value of work" (Gordon & Lenhardt, 2007). African Americans and Latinos are unaware of the other's work history and tradition, which makes it difficult for them to communicate about their shared work commonalities. African Americans' long painful history of slavery and abuse from their perspective as long-term residents within the United States influences their work patterns and low expectations of success. They see little hope of moving up the economic ladder through compliance with excessive management demands for more or faster labor, though they believe they are entitled to them. Latino immigrants take a short-term global work perspective, which makes their U.S. work valuable in comparison with work in their country of origin. Their compliance with management's extreme demands is a trade-off for them in return for higher wages, which they often send to their families outside the United States, continued employment, and possible deportation (Gordon & Lenhardt, 2007).⁸ An organizer is faced with bridging these different experiences and perspectives by encouraging diverse coworkers to find common ground as a collective combating the power of management.

Organizer 1 states, "When you're in the trenches, you need to know the other one has your back." The result of that meeting was that their shared interest in organizing workers ranked higher than their suspicion of each other. As a result of relationship building, gatherings which prepared workers for company meetings, and tools providing workers the ability to talk about the union, a committee of 26 workers met with and presented to management authorization cards signed by 70% of the service workers at the Hyatt. The hotel management was completely unaware of the underground activities that delayed their ability to respond with anti-union rhetoric. Using this delegation to management as a third tactic in the internal organizing strategy further strengthened the workers' power in their unionization efforts.

After the initial presentation of signed authorization cards, the hotel began running a series of anti-union meetings, which they called "training meetings." At these training meetings, they served steak and lobster and told their workers the union was a business, just wanted their union dues, and that they, as a corporation, had "learned their lesson." They espoused the workers' wages were low because the cost of living in their location was low. They also started a monthly lunch with the general manager and gave some workers a US\$1 to US\$1.50 raise.

One of the biggest barriers Organizer 1 faced was organizing White conservatives. He believes the majority of Whites would join unions if they were not so affected by propaganda such as Fox news. He states, "The only way I see this working is that Whites see how others are treated at

work,” and believes the biggest challenge for them is the “union itself.”

Because of the nature of UNITE-HERE’s organizing strategies, hotel workers involved in organizing campaigns are unaware of other workers’ involvement until some goal is achieved such as getting enough signature cards signed to present to management. All the organizing takes place outside of the workplace, so those involved usually meet at someone’s home. The work involves building relationships one at a time, so the organizing process takes months or even years. The secretiveness of the process is necessary to prevent management from retaliating against workers for union activity. Although retaliation is illegal and can result in sanctions against management, the legal process is slow and arduous, so avoiding the appearance of union activity in the workplace is often a better choice. Consequently, service workers in the workplace never know if they are working next to a pro-union or anti-union coworker.

Organizer 2 is a White male and has been with UNITE-HERE for 3 years. He graduated from a notable Midwest university and began organizing on that campus as a result of meeting Organizer 1. He moved to the Midwest in 2008 where he worked as a hotel bartender and barista. Organizer 2 speaks to the use of external organizing tactics as an important component in UNITE-HERE’s organizing strategy. He describes the experience of trying to unionize a group of subcontracted workers as “going through the fight; you don’t know the emotional roller coaster unless you experience the travails of going through the fight.” From those organizing efforts grew a public relations campaign featuring “big picture” messaging such as all supporters of the service workers wearing red shirts to rallies, demonstrations, and county council meetings, media exposure through an alternative-based free periodical, and radio coverage featuring methods of blacklisting workers for 1 year who leave employment at one hotel from rehire at another downtown hotel, extreme examples of wage theft resulting in a winning lawsuit against the subcontracting agency charged with the administration of hotel workers, and support from Congressmen Andre Carson, Congressman for Indiana’s 7th Congressional District, who spoke at the National Day of Action against the Hyatt Corporation in 2010.

The “big picture” messaging utilizes several external organizing tactics. Raising issues in the community about the plight of devalued and abused low-wage workers resonates with community members who may view the fight for better wages and working conditions through a David and Goliath framework. Community participation in rallies and demonstrations orchestrated to bring awareness to low-wage hospitality workers’ exploitation is captured in pictures and videos of hundreds of supporters wearing red shirts at county council meetings in which proposed ordinances concerning tax breaks for low-wage workers are proposed, discussed, and eventually vetoed by a conservative council and mayor. Utilizing free press coverage through radio and an alternative newspaper seeks to expand the listening and reading

audience to inform, enlighten, and increase a broader base of support. Creating groups of community supporters willing to speak at civic and faith-based events about the exploitative work conditions of low-wage workers and creating public pressure to make local policy changes, which help low-wage workers upgrade their living standards, are important tactics Organizer 2 promotes to instill within the communal mind the necessity of aggregated support in helping shift the balance of economic power to workers.

The narrative of Organizer 2 mirrors that of Organizer 1 in relationship to organizing a diverse workforce and the relationship with top management. Organizer 2 speaks to the diversity among service workers as challenging because

different races have different ideas of ownership. In the Midwest, if you speak a different language, you are considered in the minority and an outsider. Immigrant workers, many of whom are Latino, feel as if they don’t have the same voice as Blacks and Whites.

This is very similar to Organizer 1’s narrative concerning experiences and perspectives from workers of different racial backgrounds who struggle to find common ground within their work environment. Organizer 2 describes his relationship with top management as very adversarial. The Hyatt holds captive audience meetings and one-on-one plea sessions with workers in which workers relate being begged to stop their union activism, posts anti-union material on bulletin boards, and encourages anti-union workers to speak out against the union. “Lower level managers just want to get out of your way and didn’t want to be involved. They usually said, ‘Go talk to the top people.’” Again, this narrative reflects Organizer 1’s description of the extreme push back from the Hyatt after they received authorization cards from the majority of their workers.

Organizer 2 said the hope for the future of unions is organizing:

[Unions] have to grow or the union will die. Corporations grow so they will crush the union. This isn’t an option; you have to organize. Just the most fundamental thing is building relationships; it is fundamental to organizing and out of organizing comes relationships. New leaders emerge out of those relationships. New leaders must emerge; the snowball effect has to occur. UNITE-HERE now has organizers in Miami, San Antonio, Boston, Seattle, Chicago, Phoenix, Los Angeles, and Atlanta. We take a lot of pride in that, and we do it well.

In cultivating leaders through relationships, Organizer 2 believes female leaders are better organizers because they are better listeners and more emphatic. Although the organizing efforts of UNITE-HERE did not result in unionization for the Midwest hotel, their campaign did result in negative public relations for the Hyatt hotels, increased housekeeping wages in some hotels, and effectively ended the blacklisting of housekeepers in securing positions between hotels.

The organizing efforts of the *Hotel Workers Rising* campaign is primarily aimed at the most egregious offender of workers' rights, the Hyatt hotels, which are awarded the title of "Worst Hospitality Employer in America." Dubbed the *Hyatt Hurts* campaign, the operation emphasizes an international boycott of all Hyatt hotels and is supported by such big names as the National Football League, many of whose players said they were raised by single moms who worked in the service industry, the National Organization for Women (NOW), the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, and Moveon.org. As a result of UNITE-HERE's international boycott efforts and the backlash of bad publicity, a national contract between UNITE-HERE and the Hyatt hotels in San Francisco, Chicago, Honolulu, and Los Angeles is signed in August 2013 and runs through 2018. The agreement provides a mechanism for workers, via a solidarity clause, at the unionized hotels to take action by mid-contract (October 2015) at their own hotels if non-unionized hotels have not unionized or at least agreed to a fair process for representation. Non-unionized hotels can continue to engage in boycotts. Organizer 2 explains the Hyatt agreed to the contract in "exchange for peace." He explains he did not think the Hyatt saw the union as the enemy but rather as an obstacle to their growth.

Conclusion

The narratives of organizers involved in unionization efforts in a downtown Midwest hotel provide examples of the challenges in organizing a diverse workforce of low-wage workers in the hospitality industry. The multi-component organizing strategy using internal and external tactics results in gains for these low-wage workers. The tenacity, strength, and endurance necessary to form bonds of solidarity through covert organizing necessary to train workers in defense tactics against a well-oiled corporate anti-union machine speaks volumes about the depth and seriousness of organizing efforts to unionize low-wage workers who are often disadvantaged within the economic, social, political, and corporate structures, which seek to deskill, devalue, and dehumanize workers to maintain corporate profit margins.

Situating the organizing efforts of UNITE-HERE into LPT speaks to the sustained push and pull between labor and management as they continue to struggle for economic power. As long as management has the power to control work processes, deskill the workforce, hire and terminate workers at will, and discipline and punish workers within and outside the workplace, low-wage service workers will find it impossible to achieve gains without the formation of a collective to represent their needs. The collective has a strategic place in our current economic and social structure, which benefits workers and management. Collectives that allow workers space in which to form bonds of solidarity often translates into higher wages, better working conditions and benefits, and a voice in the workplace for low-wage

workers who not only expend those wages in the consumption of goods and services—which contributes to the economy, increases tax revenues, and makes them less dependent on government social programs—but also provides for the firm workers who feel valued through strengthened personal dignity and worth and engage in fewer production disruptions, which contributes to increased productivity and higher profits for management.

Although the efforts of UNITE-HERE to organize a diverse workforce of low-wage housekeepers in a Midwest hotel did not result in unionization, there were some gains made. A national agreement reached between UNITE-HERE and the Hyatt after a 4-year struggle included a mechanism by which non-unionized Hyatt hotels "provide Hyatt associates with a process for voting on whether to be represented by the union in limited circumstances" (Vail, 2013) prior to an October 2015 deadline (UNITE-HERE! 2013). Also, the lawsuit against the Hyatt for wage theft resulted in back pay for those workers acting as plaintiffs (Jamieson, 2012). There were small wage increases for some housekeepers and the blacklisting policy preventing workers' movements from hotel job to hotel job was dismantled.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

Notes

1. United Needle Trades and Industrial Employees (UNITE) merged with Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (HERE) in 2004 forming a new international union with 440,000 members (Tufts, 2006).
2. Bronfenbrenner & Hickey (2004) concludes 10 organizing strategies/tactics exist and that "higher win rates are associated with campaigns that use five or more comprehensive organizing tactics . . . that consistently combine comprehensive organizing tactics . . . [and that] comprehensive organizing tactics are consistently effective" (p. 45).
3. Sassen (2006) explains the process of globalization, which focuses on tearing down boundaries, often fails to include the "place boundedness" (p. 17) of activities and types of workers very vital to the globalization process. Sassen includes immigrant economies and work cultures and says that "failing to include these activities and workers ignores the variety of cultural contexts within which they exist, a diversity as present in processes of globalization as is the new international corporate culture" (p. 17).
4. Buroway (2008) calls this "surplus extraction" (p. 377).
5. Baldamus (1961) in Buroway (1985) writes about unavoidable work realities, which represent deprivation or effort. These work realities consist of impairment, which he defines as physical exertion from long work hours, excessive temperatures,

or poor lightening, tedium, which he defines as repetitive or monotonous motion, and weariness, which he defines as coercive routines within industrial work. Workers seek respite from and control over these unavoidable work realities by adapting to them through adjusting to the physical exertion and work conditions over time, being in the mood to work, and being carried along by the inertia of the repetitive motion.

6. According to the theory of social construction, an identity is only known in the context of its relationship to something else or the "other." Adib and Guerrier (2003), in trying to separate out gender identities from race, class, or nationality identities, suggest "that identity construction is both relational and contextual" (p. 415). Identity construction is relational because it "engages in Othering" (p. 415) and contextual because the "context in which this process occurs shapes the meanings, expectations and roles that particular identities carry" (p. 415).
7. Hall (1996) suggests, "The central issue of race is always historically in articulation, in a formation, with other categories and divisions and [is] constantly crossed and recrossed by the categories of class, of gender and ethnicity" (p. 444).
8. A study of African American and Latino workers in various U.S. firms found both ethnicities shared common economic goals; the more successful organizations in building solidarity were bilingual, bicultural, met outside of the workplace, and had staff/organizers who were multicultural (Marrow, 2006).

References

- Adib, A., & Guerrier, Y. (2003). The interlocking of gender with nationality, race, ethnicity and class: The narratives of women in hotel work. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 10, 413-432.
- Adler, P. (2004). *Paradise laborers: Hotel work in the global economy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Adler, P. (2007). The future of critical management studies: A Paleo-Marxist critique of labour process. *Organization Studies*, 28, 1313-1345.
- Baldamus, W. (1961). *Efficiency and effort*. London, England: Tavistock.
- Barker, K., & Christensen, K. (Eds.). (1998). *Contingent work: American employment relations in transition*. New York, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Brah, A. (1996). *Catographies of diaspora*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Braverman, H. (1974). *Labor and monopoly capital: The degradation of work in the twentieth century* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Monthly Review Press.
- Bronfenbrenner, K. (2005). The nature and process of union-organizing efforts among U.S. women workers since the mid-1990s. *Work and Occupations*, 32, 441-463. doi:10.1177/0730888405278989
- Bronfenbrenner, K. (2006). Comprehensive strategy: The key to successful organizing [Electronic version]. In *The state of the union report for the Ohio Education Association* (pp. 10-27). Columbus, OH: Ohio Education Association.
- Bronfenbrenner, K., & Hickey, R. (2004). Changing to organize: A national assessment of union organizing strategies. *DigitalCommons@ILR*, 54, 15-60.
- Buchanan, S., Vossen, P., Krause, N., Moriarty, J., Frumin, E., Shimek, J., . . . Punnett, L. (2010). Occupational injury disparities in the US hotel industry. *American Journal of Industrial Medicine*, 53, 116-125. doi:10.1002/ajim.20724
- Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2011). *Workplace injuries and illnesses—2010* [Press release]. Retrieved from http://www.bls.gov/iif/oshsum.htm#10Summary_News_Release
- Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2015a). *May 2015 metropolitan and nonmetropolitan area occupational employment and wage estimates: Indianapolis-Carmel-Anderson, IN*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor. Retrieved from http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_26900.htm#37-0000
- Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2015b). *Occupational employment and wages, May 2015: 37-2012 maids and housekeeping cleaners*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes372012.htm>
- Buroway, M. (1985). *The politics of production: Factory regimes under capitalism and socialism*. London, England: New Left Books.
- Buroway, M. (2008). The public turn: From labor process to labor movement. *Work and Occupations*, 35, 371-387.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Ghosh, B. (2003). *Elusive protection, uncertain lands: Migrant's access to human rights*. Geneva, Switzerland: International Organization for Migration.
- Gordon, J., & Lenhardt, R. (2007). *Conflict and solidarity between African American and Latino immigrant workers*. Berkeley, CA: The Chief Justice Earl Warren Institute of Race, Ethnicity, and Diversity: Berkeley School of Law.
- Greenhouse, S. (2006, June 16). The new face of solidarity. *The New York Times*. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/16/business/16union.html?ei=50&r=0>
- Hall, S. (1996). New ethnicities. In D. Morley & K. Chen (Eds.), *Critical dialogues in cultural studies* (p. 544). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Jamieson, D. (2012, December 12). Indianapolis hotel workers settle lawsuit over wage theft allegations, Business. *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/12/12/indianapolis-hotel-workers-lawsuit_n_2286046.html
- Landmark Study Reveals RIO of Business Travel. (2009). *Media and communications*. Retrieved from <https://d6.ustravel.org/news/press-releases/landmark-study-reveals-roi-business-travel>
- Mann, E. (2001). "A race struggle, a class struggle, a women's struggle all at once": Organizing on the buses of L.A. *Socialist Register*, 37, 259-273.
- Marrow, H. (2006, August). *Not just conflict: Intergroup relations in a Southern poultry processing plant*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southern Sociological Association, Montreal, Québec, Canada.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1967). *Capital: A critique of political economy*. New York, NY: International Publishers Company, Incorporated.
- OnsOyen, L. E., Mykletun, R. J., & Steiro, T. J. (2009). Silenced and invisible: The work-experience of room-attendants in Norwegian hotels. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 9, 81-102.
- Piore, M. J. (1972). *Notes for a theory of labor market stratification*. Working paper No. 95. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

- The Power of Travel: Economic Impact of Travel and Tourism. (2009). *Travel powers Indiana*. Retrieved from http://209.59.134.11/statistics/impact_sub.htm?select_state_id=15
- Sassen, S. (2006). *Cities in a world economy* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Sawchuk, P. H. (2009). Anticolonialism, labor and the pedagogies of community unionism: The case of hotel workers in Canada. In A. Kempf (Ed.), *Explorations of education purpose* (Vol. 8, pp. 159-178). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer.
- Scherzer, T., Rugulies, R., & Krause, N. (2005). Work-related pain and injury and barriers to workers' compensation among Las Vegas hotel room cleaners. *American Journal of Public Health: Research and Practice*, 95, 483-488.
- Seifert, A. M., & Messing, K. (2006). Cleaning up after globalization: An ergonomic analysis of work activity of hotel cleaners. *Antipode*, 38, 557-577.
- Smith, C. (2012, March). The short overview of the labour process perspective and history of the International Labour Process Conference. *Paper presented at the International Labour Process Conference*, Leeds, UK.
- Smith, S. E. (2012, April 17). Hyatt hotel housekeepers, fired after protesting sexual harassment, rally for better treatment. *Alternet*. Retrieved from http://www.alternet.org/story/154439/hyatt_hotel_housekeepers_fired_after_protesting_sexual_harassment_rally_for_better_treatment/
- Soltani, E., & Wilkinson, A. (2010). What is happening to flexible workers in the supply chain partnerships between hotel housekeeping departments and their partner employment agencies? *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 29, 108-119. doi:10.1016/j.ijhm.2009.06.006
- Tufts, S. (2006). Renewal from different directions: The case of UNITE-HERE Local 75. In P. Kumar & C. Schenk (Eds.), *Paths to union renewal: Canadian experiences* (pp. 201-220). Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press.
- UNITE-HERE. (2012a). *Hotel workers rising*. Available from <http://www.hotelworkersrising.org/>
- UNITE-HERE. (2012b). *What is UNITE HERE*. Retrieved from <http://unite-archive.library.cornell.edu/about/index.html>
- UNITE-HERE! (2013). *UNITE HERE and Hyatt reach national agreement*. Retrieved from <http://unitehere.org/unite-here-and-hyatt-reach-national-agreement/>
- UNITE-HERE Industries. (2015). Retrieved from <http://unitehere.org/who-we-are/industries/>
- U.S. Travel Association. (2013). *Talking points and facts*. Retrieved from <https://www.ustravel.org/marketing/national-travel-and-tourism-week/talking-points-and-facts>
- Vail, B. (2013, September). Unite Here and Hyatt hit hiccups in peace process. *In These Times*. Retrieved from http://inthesetimes.com/working/entry/15593/in_peace_pact_with_hyatt_hotels_unite_here_makes_steady_progress
- Williamson, O. (1980). The organization of work: A comparative institutional assessment. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 1, 5-38.
- Zuberi, D. (2007). Organizing for better working conditions and wages: The UNITE HERE! Hotel Workers Rising campaign. *Just Labour: A Canadian Journal of Work & Society*, 10, 60-73.

Author Biography

Marquita Walker is an associate professor in the Department of Labor Studies at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis. She holds a PhD in Educational Administration and Policy Analysis and an MA in Public Affairs from the University of MO, Columbia, an MA in English from Missouri State University, and a BS in English from Drury University. Her research interests include worker education and reintegration into the workforce, organizing low wage workers, and issues involving poverty and social stratification.